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Importance of Portfolio Building for University Students

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Project Summary

A portfolio is described as “a digital container capable of storing visual and auditory content including text, images, video and sound” (Abrami and Barrett, 2005, p. 2). Portfolios are becoming a priority for graduates entering the apparel industry or any creative career field. Electronic portfolios or e-portfolios are on the rise due to advancements in technology. Students can create e-portfolios through many free websites. These e-portfolios give students and graduates the ability to showcase everything they have done inside and outside the classroom in one place. E-portfolios give employers the opportunity to view a potential employment candidate’s skills, experience, and creativity in one place. Portfolios and e-portfolios can also be used inside of the classroom to grade assign to students and to figure out how the curriculum is being used by students.

This creative project provided portfolio work samples from a project-based upper level Apparel Merchandising and Product Development course. Photographs were taken during the Futuristic Floral Fashion Show in April 2017; photos were edited and distributed to students for portfolio use. It is recommended that final garment photography become an annual part of the AMPD programs annual fashion show. Also, early emphasis on portfolio building paired with formal portfolio building through course work is essential for creative majors.

Keywords: apparel, creative, portfolios, e-portfolios, industry, employment, curriculum
Introduction

Portfolios are important for students entering creative career fields like Apparel Merchandising and Product Development (AMPD). They give students the ability to present their creative work in one easily accessible place. Portfolios are becoming a significant part of the hiring process for the apparel industry.

The purpose of this creative project was to document AMPD junior and senior students’ garment creation in AMPD 4063 Advanced Apparel Production course for integration in their professional portfolios. The project included photographing and editing students’ progress as the garments were created. The finished garments modeled at the 2017 Enclothe Fashion Show for program stakeholders, potential employers and the public were also photographed for inclusion in the portfolios. A review of literature established the need and benefits of portfolio use among students entering creative career fields.

The AMPD program at the University of Arkansas includes classes in business, retailing, apparel production, science, social science, and the liberal arts. Students are provided basic knowledge about the textile and apparel industries (Apparel Merchandising and Product Development, 2017). The University of Arkansas AMPD program is unique as it is the only program in the United States that requires students to take both merchandising and product development courses (K. Smith, personal communication, November 13, 2017). Other programs require students to choose merchandising or product development and take courses in one focused area (K. Smith, personal communication, November 13, 2017). According to Dr. Kathleen Smith (personal communication, November 13, 2017), Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Arkansas, the AMPD program is “a comprehensive merchandising and product
development program that lays the foundation for entry level positions in the apparel industry including classroom and experiential components.”

Students in the AMPD program take 48 hours of AMPD courses, complete at least one required internship, and attend a faculty-led domestic or international study tour before graduation. Internship employment can be anywhere around the world, any semester after completion of all 3000 level required AMPD classes. Study tour requirements are fulfilled in Las Vegas, New York, Italy, London/Paris, or China. Commonly paired minors include management, supply chain, international business, enterprise resource planning, accounting, world language, journalism, and theatre (AMPD, 2017).

Students gain jobs after graduation “through internship placements, career development center on-campus interviews, networking with AMPD advisory board, [and] networking with alums” (K. Smith, personal communication, November 13, 2017). The graduate school and employment average placement rate is 97% for AMPD at the University of Arkansas. Career options for AMPD graduates include buying and merchandising, brand management, technical design, quality assurance, retail or wholesale management, textiles, product development, and CAD specialization (AMPD, 2017).

In 2016 the University of Arkansas AMPD program had 62 graduates. A survey, conducted by the University of Arkansas Career Development Center (2016), was administered to AMPD graduates. Sixty AMPD graduates responded. The survey results revealed that 51 graduates were employed, two continued their education, six were still seeking a career, and one was not seeking a career. The 2016 placement rate for AMPD students was 89.8 percent. The mean starting salary for AMPD graduates was $33,486 (Career Development Center, 2016). The average number of jobs in 2014 for fashion design was 23,000, buyers and purchasing agents
was 443,200, advertising, promotions and marketing managers was 225,200, and wholesale and manufacturing sales representatives was 1,800,900 (Career Development Center, 2017).

**Literature Review**

**Project Based Learning**

Project Based Learning is an important aspect for university students especially those in creative majors. The ability to express what a student has actively learned through project-based learning is essential for creative employment. Students cultivate the ability to address issues and redefine problems through this method of learning. The skills gained through project-based learning include problem solving, invention, collaboration, and creativity (Ball, Pollard, & Stanley, 2010). According to Kim and Johnson (2007), “collaboration between industry and academia can produce a win-win situation for both entities” (p. 303).

Questions about the future of the apparel industry explore what the apparel industry will look like now that consumers want to participate in the design process. What types of design training are needed for students with merchandise buying evolving into product development? Due to quicker production times and production happening outside of the United States, questions regarding work expectations and locations are also at the forefront. These questions allow educators to think about which content should be shared and emphasized to students to prepare them for future careers in the evolving apparel industry (Kim & Johnson, 2007).

Ball, Pollard, and Stanley (2010), examined more than 3,500 creative graduates from 26 higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. Based on the study, “just over half the graduates (52 percent) felt their courses had prepared them very or fairly well for the world of work. Respondents would have liked a better appreciation of what creative employment would be like, improved understanding of client needs, training in IT/software, business skills and the
practicalities of working freelance” (Ball, Pollard, & Stanley, 2010, p. 9). More than 4 out of 5 graduates had at one point, in their college career, participated in shows or exhibitions of their work, self or peer evaluations, teamwork, and teachings by experts in their field of study. The respondents rated most of their course activities as very useful. Respondents considered “Personal and Professional Development (PPD), teamwork and teaching by practitioners as the most useful in relation to their careers” (Ball, Pollard, & Stanley, 2010, p. 9).

“Creative graduates had developed skills required for their careers on their undergraduate courses, rating most highly creatively and innovation, visual skills and presentation, but they had less well-developed IT, networking and client-facing skills” (Ball, Pollard, & Stanley, 2010, p. 1). According to Keist and Bruer (2016), the academic content Apparel Merchandising majors have to get them ready for the industry includes the courses they have taken and how they apply them to the fashion industry, any class projects they may have had that could have been presented by PowerPoint presentations, Word documents, or photography and visual displays, as well as organization events or certification programs. Due to the skills acquired, creative graduates placed themselves at the lead for commencing changes in the creative sector. Creative graduates are able to adapt easily to changing situations and continue learning, which allows them to fit into modern creative careers (Ball, Pollard, & Stanley, 2010). Due to an increase in competency-based curriculum for college students, portfolios, specifically e-portfolios, have grown for students in higher education (Ward & Moser, 2008). According to Rhodes (2011), e-portfolios not only allow professors to collect assigned student work, e-portfolios also allow students to present accomplishments outside of the classroom allowing university faculty and internship and career supervisors to assess the student or graduate’s accomplishments.
Apparel Industry

The creative industry, specifically in apparel, is a difficult industry in which to gain employment after graduation. Apparel majors and creative majors must be equipped with different skills before entering the industry than in many other majors. Creative graduates are unlike many other majors because they tend to put a desire for learning and creativity above high earnings (Ball, Pollard, & Stanley, 2010). Additionally, creative graduates strive for a good balance between work and personal life (Ball, Pollard, & Stanley, 2010).

Ball, Pollard, and Stanley (2010) found that when it comes to obtaining a career in fashion or in another creative industry, self-confidence and self-management were the most important skills for potential employees. Many apparel graduates gain entry into the fashion industry through unpaid internships or voluntary types of work where they gain valuable experience that they cannot obtain in the classroom (Ball, Pollard, & Stanley, 2010). Students share industry experiences “from internships and employment, writing samples, and links to personal blogs” to get a career in the industry (Kesit & Bruer, 2016, p. 55).

Kim and Johnson (2007) identified what future apparel design and merchandising graduates believed would define the industry in the next 10 to 20 years. “Participants predicted that technological developments would be the prominent force for changes across all levels of the future apparel industry” (Kim & Johnson, 2007, p. 283). Brooks (2002) indicated experts predicted technology would be the most prominent factor in determining social changes. Universities must monitor and adapt to changing industry technologies. “As hard as academic programs work to stay connected to the industry, it is quite possible that changes occur at a faster pace in the workplace than in academic settings” (Kim & Johnson, 2007, p. 302).
Portfolios

With technology advancing, many believe the best kind of portfolio for students to create is an electronic portfolio or an e-portfolio. Abrami and Barrett (2005) define an electronic portfolio as “a digital container capable of storing visual and auditory content including text, images, video and sound” (p. 2). According to Miller and Morgaine (2009), a well-done e-portfolio is an amazing tool for universities. E-portfolios accurately display student learning and promote deeper learning and education. “Forty percent of campuses of all types – large and small, public and private, research and liberal arts, and community colleges—recently reported using student e-portfolios” (Rhodes, 2011, pg. 3).

Portfolio building has become a staple for creative majors wanting to enter into creative careers. Yao, Thomas, Nickens, Downing, Burkett, and Lamson (2008) define a portfolio as “a systematic and purposeful collection of work samples that document student achievement or progress over time” (p. 10). Millennials are facing a higher unemployment rate than other generations, and need to develop a personal brand and differentiate themselves from other potential employees. One solution is to create online portfolios (Keist & Bruer, 2016). In pre-internship courses students can create online portfolios to help when applying for internships or careers after graduation (Keist & Bruer, 2016).

Portfolios are helpful when it comes to job-searches for students. Portfolios can be shared with human resource managers who can view work samples relating to the position in one place. Universities can also use portfolios to assess their students learning and reflection through the student’s work (Ward & Moser, 2008). “Portfolios are viewed as a way of determining not just how much students know, but also how they are able to apply and use what they know” (Whitworth, Deering, Hardy, & Jones, 2011, pg. 95). According to Black and Cloud (2009), a
A portfolio serves a creative student the same way a thesis proposal serves a research student. An online portfolio heightens the information from a student’s resume. Unlike a resume, a student’s personality, skills, and experience is presented creatively in an online portfolio (Keist & Bruer, 2016).

Creating an online portfolio is user friendly and free or inexpensive (Keist & Bruer, 2016). Students who face financial challenges can utilize online portfolios to present class projects to future employers. Keist and Bruer (2016) suggest the following for quality portfolios: keeping a professional URL using one’s full name, keep the portfolio simple and readable, use a monochromatic color scheme and an easy-to-read, professional font. Additionally, include pictures of your work, update constantly, connect your email and social media accounts, avoid using large group photos, and keep everything appropriate and professional (Keist and Bruer, 2016). Students develop portfolios through research and reflection as well as with guidance from professors in their areas of study. An apparel merchandising student’s portfolio may include a student’s biography, a description of a concept or theme, photographs or designs, garments, exhibitions, and projects (Black & Cloud, 2009). Ward and Moser (2008) believe “students can create e-portfolio artifacts from video/audio streaming of their presentations, examples of their writing, or demonstrated competencies in specific professional/regulatory standards for viewing by faculty and potential employers” (p. 13). Ward and Moser (2008) surveyed companies to determine if e-portfolios would be utilized in the future and what type of information employers would find valuable in a student’s e-portfolio. Responses revealed that 56 percent of respondents said they planned to use e-portfolios in the future. Employers described the value of works included in e-portfolios as resumes and references 93 percent valuable, written work 39 percent valuable, projects 37...
percent valuable, presentations 33 percent valuable, lesson plans 23 percent valuable, case studies 7 percent valuable, and artistic performances 6 percent valuable (Ward & Moser, 2008).

**Development Plan**

The need for quality portfolios in creative careers has increased in recent years and helps students get ahead of their competition when applying for jobs. Portfolio content is particularly important and must be of high quality. The following outlines this project’s process of creating high quality content for AMPD students to add to their creative portfolios. The capturing and editing of photos of student’s work helped them in creating quality portfolio content.

**AMPD Futuristic Floral Fashion Show**

AMPD students at the University of Arkansas participated in the spring 2017 AMPD Futuristic Floral Fashion Show event. The show took place Friday, April 28 at 8:00 p.m. at the Fayetteville Town Center in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The purpose of the fashion show event was to push students to create a garment on a deadline and showcase their design and development skills. The AMPD fashion show provided real life experience for students. Participation in the fashion show and the garment creation process are resume and portfolio builders. Approximately 800 people attended the 2017 fashion show including faculty, industry professionals, potential employers, students, friends, and family of the designers. According to Stephanie Hubert (personal communications, 2017), AMPD instructor at the University of Arkansas, students worked around 40-60 hours total on their garments and 75 garments were featured in the 2017 AMPD Fashion Show.
Advanced Apparel Production Course

Design and production of garments, showcased in the AMPD fashion show, occurred during enrollment in Advanced Apparel Production during the spring 2017 semester. Advanced Apparel Production is a graduation requirement for all AMPD students. Advanced Apparel Production is “an advanced study of product development incorporating technology used in the industry for a career in fashion merchandising and/or product development in a computer laboratory environment” (AMPD, 2017). Computer Based Methods of Apparel, Quality Assessment of Apparel, and Apparel Production are prerequisites of Advanced Apparel Production.

Project Planning

Project planning began in a meeting with honors thesis advisor, Casandra Cox. Creative project ideas were brainstormed based on internship experiences and on photoshoots in Italy. Through this process it was determined that the focus would be on producing high-quality portfolio work samples for students enrolled in the Advanced Apparel Production Course. A project timeline was developed (see Figure 1) to guide the process. During Planning, approval was secured from the fashion show directors as well as the AMPD Advanced Apparel Production instructor, Stephanie Hubert. Ms. Hubert approved the photographing of students during class, backstage during the fashion show, and after the fashion show. Phase One included photographing student work during classes, back stage at the fashion show and models after the show. Phase Two included identifying images appropriate for professional portfolio use and editing those images. Phase Three included securing contact information and distributing the edited, professional portfolio ready images.
Phase One: Photographing Work

The necessary photography equipment for use during the semester was secured. Thirty-six students were enrolled in two sections of Advanced Apparel Production during the spring 2017 semester. One section met on Tuesday and Thursday from 8:00 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. and the second section met on Tuesday and Thursday from 11:00 a.m. to 1:45 p.m. The work of students as they designed and constructed garments for display in the Futuristic Floral Fashion Show event during multiple class periods and days was photographed (see Figures 2-9). The student’s final preparations backstage prior to the fashion show on April 28, 2017 was also photographed (see Figures 10-13). Finally, the garments worn by the models after the show was staged and photographed with an official fashion show backdrop behind each model. Students were reminded that there would be a place to take photographs after the show during one of the last class times. Approximately 90 photographs were captured during the 16-week course and the fashion show event.

Phase Two: Editing

The staged fashion show photos were the primary photos students wanted for professional portfolio use; thus, time was invested and photos were edited for every student who had a garment in the fashion show (see Figures 14-28). The edits improved digital image quality and made enhancements to demonstrate professionalism and editing skills. Editing skills were developed through course work in AGED 4243, Graphic Design in AFLS, and through an internship working on photoshoots. Adobe® Photoshop® Creative Cloud was used and each photo was edited individually. Content aware editing techniques and adjustments were primarily used. Some common edits that were used were brightness/contrast, vibrance, hue/saturation, and
the healing brush tool to get rid of any face shine. Multiple layers were also created and the model was just selected and made them specifically brighter than the background so the garment would pop. Each photo was saved in a native format (PSD) and in a sharable format (JPEG). Each image required between 10-20 minutes editing time.

**Phase Three: Distribution**

After editing was completed, Ms. Hubert helped to identify who created each of the garments. The online University of Arkansas student directory was utilized to locate email addresses for students still enrolled at the University. Students who graduated May of 2017 were contacted by Ms. Cox through social media outlets. Finally, Professor Hubert provided alumni contact emails for students who had graduated but did not respond to social media requests. Edited photos of the 14 out of 15 photographed and edited garments were sent to the respective student designers and creators with a message explaining the project and the goal of the photos as usable professional portfolio content (see Figure 29). One edited photo was not sent out with that message because it was a photo of the garment created by myself. The backstage and classroom photos were edited and sent to Ms. Hubert to use as teasers for the 2018 Fashion Show.

**Discussion and Results**

This project was developed out of experiences in the AMPD program, own interests in building a professional portfolio along with experiences with photo shoots and editing. Allowing AMPD students to have edited, quality photos of garments they created enhances their portfolios which should aid them when applying for internships and careers. It also provided a strong body of work for me to include in my portfolio, and provided a service to the AMPD students that has
not been done previously. Through my review of literature, it became clear that the inclusion of quality work is a key for using portfolios, and portfolios are key to those in creative careers.

When attempting to take the photographs of the models after the show, obstacles were faced. Many people were in a hurry to leave, were overwhelmed by the whole process or were trying to connect with family and friends who came to support them and did not come to the photo area for me to photograph their models and garments. Thus, only 18 garments out of the 75 garments in the show were photographed. As an AMPD student having a garment modeled in the show and there had to be a balance of fashion show responsibilities and photographing responsibilities. Once editing of the photos began, it took multiple tries to figure out the right way to edit the photos and make the garment the focal point. With help from Ms. Cox, who instructs the graphic design course, what was necessary to make the models and garments stand out was discovered. The final images demonstrate growth in editing skills. After sending out my photographs, positive feedback was received from the students who responded (see Figure 30).

**Conclusion/ Implications/ Recommendations**

Allowing AMPD students the opportunity to have quality photos taken of their garments benefited them when creating or updating their professional portfolios. After the fashion show, students were observed who were so focused on being finished and relieved about the end of a long process that they did not think about photographing their garments on their model to add to their portfolios. The AMPD Fashion Show should hire someone or ask a skilled student to come take photographs of the models in the garments after every show in front of a professional background in addition to action and candid photographs during the show and backstage. This would add value to students in the AMPD program as they would have quality documentation of real work to include in e-portfolios.
The edited, quality photographs of the designed garments are imperative for student portfolio building. Portfolio building should become a larger part of the University of Arkansas AMPD curriculum, specifically e-portfolio building. Currently, AMPD students only have to create a portfolio in their pre-internship class. Though this is a helpful introduction for students, they are either creating paper portfolios or portfolios via PowerPoint which are not at the professional level needed in the competitive fashion industry market. Paper portfolios have become outdated with the fast advancements of technology in the apparel industry. PowerPoints are in some ways outdated as well with e-portfolios being interactive and hosted on-line.

AMPD students are introduced to page-turning web based e-portfolios in the required Graphic Design in AFLS class, but this class focuses on showcasing the graphic design work students created in the class. Within an AMPD class, whether that is the pre-internship class or another class, students should be required to create an e-portfolio that consists of the work they have done inside and outside of the AMPD program.

The apparel industry is a competitive industry and a portfolio allows a student or graduate to have an advantage over their competition. Portfolio building, specifically e-portfolio building, should be a major component of AMPD curriculum as well as curriculum for other creative majors. E-portfolio development should be introduced to students early in their college careers so they understand the significance and future impact of the portfolio. Students should be briefed their freshman year on the importance of building an e-portfolio with their major and it should be revisited throughout their academic program. This would allow students to keep records of all projects they created in classes and through projects outside of the classroom. Properly documenting these projects start to finish is a key component of a quality portfolio. Five of the students who received edited photographs provided positive feedback through their
correspondence. Many online job applications provide a place to link an online portfolio; thus, educating students about this aspect of the job search process may help them improve placement rates in the fashion industry that literature identifies as difficult to obtain. Moreover, it could help students maintain a competitive edge over other apparel programs across the nation.
References


Appendix

Figure 1. Flow chart for planning and Phases One through Three.
Figure 2. Student pinning their garment.

Figure 3. Students detailed work.
Figure 4. Student sewing their garment.

Figure 5. Student pinning their garment.
Figure 6. Student cutting their fabric.

Figure 7. Student ironing their garment.
Figure 8. Student sewing their garment.

Figure 9. Student pinning their fabric.
Figure 10. Garments hanging backstage.

Figure 11. Models getting their hair done backstage.
Figure 12. Models getting their makeup done backstage.

Figure 13. Student doing final edits on garment backstage.
Figure 14. Before editing and after editing photos of model one.
Figure 15. Before editing and after editing photos of model two.
Before editing and after editing photos of model three.

Figure 16.
Figure 17. Before editing and after editing photos of model four.
Figure 18. Before editing and after editing photos of model five.
Figure 19. Before editing and after editing photos of model six.
Figure 20. Before editing and after editing photos of models seven and eight.
Figure 21. Before editing and after editing photos of model nine.
Figure 22. Before editing and after editing photos of models 10 and 11.
Figure 23. Before editing and after editing photos of models 12 and 13.
Figure 24. Before editing and after editing photos of model 14.
Figure 25. Before editing and after editing photos of model 15.
Figure 26. Before editing and after editing photos of model 16.
Figure 27. Before editing and after editing photos of model 17.
Figure 28. Before editing and after editing photos of model 18.
PORTFOLIO BUILDING FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Figure 29. Example message that was sent to each student during photo distribution.

Figure 30. Responses from students regarding their portfolio images.